

Shaping the stone

MARY ASWELL DOLL

Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah, Georgia

ABSTRACT: Myth is a marvelous source for releasing imagination, since the stories of myth contain strange images and shocking metaphors. These stories are not just fanciful; they are provocative. Myths provoke. Because they rupture normal perception, myths can awaken and illuminate what waits to be expressed, not what is already known. Myths, then, are excellent vehicles for encouraging creativity in the classroom, no matter what level of student. A final project in my myth class requires a response to an impression, the “impress” being that which affected deeply both mind and feeling. My art students’ impressions ranged from wooden models, clay sculptures, or drawings; to chess pieces, songs, or monologues. In constructing their responses, many students were illuminating aspects of themselves of which they were previously unaware. And as a class we came to discover that what is called “myth” has actually anticipated what modern science calls “theory,” as in quantum mechanics or string theory. Story and science, myth and theory: these are creative ventures toward brave new worlds.

KEYWORDS: Myth, writing, creativity, theory, metaphor, perception.

In her work with creation myths, Marie-Louise Von Franz (1972) researched myths from all over the world and presented numerous and differing stories early peoples told about the creation of the world. There are stories of creation by accident, through anxiety, out of clouds; creation from clay, from combing, from boredom; creation through emergence, through brooding, through desire; creation from laughter, masturbation, spitting; creation by one, by two, by four; creation by Raven, by Maple Sprout, by Earth-Doctor. I particularly like the myth of the Munduruku tribe from South America:

Rairu stumbled over a stone which was hollow like a cup and he shouted at the stone. Karu, his father, told him to pick up the stone with which he had quarreled. Rairu did so and took the stone and put it on his head. It began to grow in all directions and to be very heavy, and Rairu said to his father, “This stone is very heavy.” The stone grew more and more and Rairu could not walk any longer, but the stone still went on growing. It then took the shape of a cup which forms the sky, and on it appeared the sun (p. 66).

This is a creation-by-stone story. Indeed, sometimes the process of creating can feel very burdensome, like a great weight that hangs (in this case, literally) over the head. But then, miraculously, the stone changes shape, becomes something else, and creates a cosmos. Listening to that story, I immediately am put inside it. I can see Rairu, hear him shout, picture the stone, and then picture the miracle of the shape change, stone into cup, cup into sky and sun. Such is the power of myth to awaken the listener to an “as if” reality (Wheelwright, 1968). Such, too, the power of the creative spirit.

These stories, von Franz reminds us, are not just fanciful. They describe a creative process for writers and artists, as well: creation requires an interruption from outside the confines of ego consciousness, a smashing-up experience, an onslaught, a stone over the head. And what is revealed from that smash-up or from under that rock is nothing less than a new world. But to access newness, a weight must be lifted or a stone rolled back. The left brain, it would seem, will go on its boring way until a hole is bored for right brain access. Imagination, Dennis Sumara writes, requires ruptures, “in order to illuminate what is silenced” (1996, p. 128). This idea of rupturing so as to illuminate a silence is highly provocative for educators, the root of education being to lead out that which lies within and of curriculum being to let course that which flows within. There is a world out there, or in there.

Interestingly, the Bible’s less metaphoric way to imagine the archetype of creation is a world away from the fabulous. The Hebrew-Christian myth is more abstract, largely a vocal and rational affair: God simply says, calls, makes, divides, sets and sees (he does not shout). Then he names. Then he grants Adam the power to name: “And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air and to every beast of the field” (Genesis 2: 20). Naming creates worlds, creatures, humans. One lacks identity until one is named or until one names one’s self or the inhabitants of one’s space. Or one’s identity can be shattered by a name – “Nigger” for instance, as Countee Cullen (1925/ 2005) relays. First day of every class meeting there is a naming, often merely evoking a rote response from students and teachers. But naming is a powerful ritual of call and response; that little, automatic exercise checking the roll book is actually attaching a world of not-yet to a name of already-is.

For educators seeking creativity in the classroom, what are the stones that need to be removed or, rather, reshaped? In pagan stories, the stone is considered fertile. I wish to imagine the metaphor of the stone in such a way as that which contains potentiality. A stone over the head is a potent metaphor for the blocking that needs a shove, the heaviness out of which a world can be shaped. Now, in my myth classes (I teach World Myth), the stone might be those nuisances called tests and quizzes that require students to have at least some grasp of the material: Who was Prometheus, for instance? But more importantly for mythic studies is the cluster of images surrounding mythic stories. What image of Prometheus is striking? His fire-bringing? His punishment against the rock? What fertile ground for imagination do the specific word pictures of his story invite the left brain of inquiry to open into the right brain of creativity? In the following discussion I suggest that the study of world myth can “illuminate what is silenced”. The stories of early peoples are so fabulous and outlandish that if the ear listens better, new awareness can rupture old habits. And worlds can be created.

My final assignment in Introduction to World Myth is a project that may be creative or analytical but should reflect understanding of a particular myth that impressed the student. “Impress”: the word as Webster describes it has weight and relates to the mind: “impress: to affect deeply or strongly in mind or feelings; to fix deeply or firmly on the mind or memory; to press (a thing) into or on something; to apply with pressure so as to leave a mark.” This final assignment is announced at the beginning of class, and most of

the students start rummaging for ideas early on. Since I teach in an art college, I suggest that the creation may be a model, painting, video, story, or sculpture; but whatever form it takes, an artistic statement must indicate how the artist envisions the project to be “mythic.” With these instructions I intend to encourage students to think as myth thinks: metaphorically, non-sequentially, paradoxically, sometimes humourfully and playfully, but always conscious of a strange and fabulous otherness. My college is very techno, very “cool” (we were voted the “hottest art college” by *Newsweek* 2005), and my students grew up with “cool” video games and comics that feature mythic superheroes who mostly (blatantly) represent a two dimensional Good-versus-Evil plot line. Hardly fabulous, hardly other. I intend the project to encourage students to nuance their techno experience, express their cultural background, and work within their major field (fashion, furniture design, film, illustration, architecture or the like.) And, of course, I try to impress the notion of mythic “fabulous otherness” as a basis for creating their projects.

Of the scores of wonderful projects, I will present five that I think best illustrate both the variety of art fields and the quality of work. But what would an essay on creativity in the classroom be if it did not consider “success” in terms of student growth? Over and over I witness students coming alive in ways that surprise me, making me realize ever more that the inner life of students can find expression when given freedom. My guidelines are thus deliberately vague so as to avoid overplanning, in the belief, as John Miller writes, that “the soul thrives in a climate where spontaneity is present. . . . it thrives in an atmosphere of paradox, silence, and spontaneity and thus can contribute to the change that is unfolding” (2000, p. 151). In the art culture, students are used to highly programmed assignments, with exact measurements, paper size and texture outlined in precise detail. The lack of such for this assignment frustrates some but, for others, they just take off!

Project One was a chessboard with pieces that represent the Norse Ragnarok (Apocalypse). Samantha decided that Ragnarok, the final battle of the gods against the giants, could actually be “played out” like a chess game. Her figures were Loki with his legions of giants, creatures and spirits of the damned on one side and Odin and his army of the Chosen Slain and Valkyries on the other side. The board was the field of Vigrid where the battle was said to have taken place. While Samantha referenced video games familiar to her, such as Final Fantasy, Kingdom of Hearts, Ragnarok Online, Riviera and others, she wanted her game to be more “classical,” like chess, like myth. The idea of strategy rather than massacre was her new take on an old idea and one that demonstrated many hours of rendering.

Project Two was a wooden model of The Trojan Horse. Cynthia, a furniture major, crafted the horse as a toy for children. Hollow inside, it could be opened from the back, to reveal several dozen toy soldiers she bought on EBay. A miniature cotton ladder was affixed to the side, by which the soldiers could climb down in order to sack a city. While the horse was like what one would expect from either reading Homer or seeing Brad Pitt, Cynthia’s understanding of the metaphor of tricking in the form of gifting was eerily relevant. She wrote:

I find the idea of the Trojan Horse very interesting because I think about how our decisions can take us one direction or another in life. Had the Trojans burned The Horse

that day, their walls most likely would not have been breached, thus changing the outcome of the war and mythical history as we know it. I think our country is at a time of great change. Never have we been so horribly attacked as we were on 9/11. I saw the attack directly with my own eyes and went to the Pentagon the next day to see the damage there. I think the government needs to be watching out for the next Trojan Horse attack, as I'm sure we will see one in the near future. I hope not, but perhaps we could be the next Troy.

Cynthia was one of those who came alive when it was her time to make her presentation. Until then, she had sat in the back, often leaning against the wall, enduring the two and a half hour classes. She worried if she would pass the course. She did.

Project Three was a story of Jonah and the Whale, told from Jonah's viewpoint. Noah, the writer, was a quiet speaker in class, although speak he did. He knew a lot, supplemented material with long, barely audible commentary from his seat. I dreaded calling on him because no one could hear him, he only addressed me, and he was long winded. Enter "Jonah". As usual, Noah (note the similarity with the name) seemed to extricate himself from the setting: his woolen cap covered his head, and his eyes never left his text. Bending, he began to read in that soft, barely audible voice; I dreaded what, by the number of pages, would be a very long presentation to a class that would squirm, cast looks, or fall asleep. But that did not happen. A strange silence fell over the room. He had us spellbound by his words. It was as if Jonah himself were talking to us. He began:

I once did not believe in God. I thought the stories were no more than false tales spread from one old man to another. I thought the stories were spread to keep people scared, and prevent them from finding any joy in life. The stories I thought were meant to keep the young from wondering why our once majestic city was now full of paupers. They said the music left when the gold was given away. They said that without sacrificing the old celebrations we would have been destroyed. An old man they call a prophet had told them this many years ago. Those were my thoughts when I left Nineveh with my youthful blood agitated and set on adventure.

Noah must have read to us for fifteen minutes. He never slipped up his words, never looked at the audience. He was Jonah. I think his utter seriousness was part of the magic he drew around us that afternoon. But I think, too, that this boy, whose essays were riddled with error and were carelessly constructed, suddenly took flight with language in an almost-Biblical way. The deliberate use of repetition, the clean prose, the story line: all were wondrous to hear. Oddly, Noah ends his story with words that could as well describe the effect his telling had on us that day:

This was the story the old man on the hill had told me. His words struck with a truth that is still difficult to comprehend. It is not the story itself that caused me to believe it, but the aura which surrounded him. I returned to Nineveh with his story and realized that though my journey was short I discovered more than my imagination ever created.

Project Four was a charcoal drawing of Prometheus. Derek unfurled his drawing and taped it above the chalk board while we watched in silence. His figure loomed out at us. “Who is this?” he asked the class. One student responded, “Christ”. The uncanny response made me jolt. Yes, Prometheus is a Greek Christ, or Christ is a Greek Prometheus. The punishment, the bound arms, the naked torso, the hugely important figure, the helper god: many of the descriptors of Christ can be found in Prometheus, although the comparison is not generally made. The archetype of the dying god precedes the Christian era and is found in many Middle East and Norse cultures, including Attis, Adonis, Hyacinthus, Narcissus, Dionysus, Osiris, Agdistis, Mithras and Odin. Prometheus is not included in the literature as a Christ archetype, even though he saves humankind and suffers (he is chained naked to a pillar in the Caucasian mountains where a vulture tears at his liver; the liver grows back and the torment endures). Probably because Prometheus angers the Supreme Being, Zeus, and is seen as a defiant helper, he is not a Christian model of the dutiful son. Instead of tree, there is rock; instead of apotheosis, there is torture; instead of sacrifice for our sins, there is sacrifice for his transgression.

The discussion in class was along the above lines. Derek agreed that at some level he had had Christ in mind when he began his drawing. He wanted to focus on the moment just before torment, just before the vulture comes again to pluck out the liver. He wanted to capture supreme sacrifice with the outstretched hands, the open mouth, and the sad but knowing eyes. As we gazed on his work another student asked if Derek intended to make Prometheus in his own image. Yes, well, sort of. Almost unknowing, the likeness took shape, he said. (Most student drawings of mythic figures, I was discovering, were recognizable self-portraits of the artists). How our perceptions are formed in our own image! How what impresses us illuminates our unknowings!

Creativity in the classroom does not come, however, without repercussion. What shimmers below surfaces can be images that disturb normalcy and challenge what passes as acceptable discourse. Certainly, the mix of myth and religion was one idea that disturbed my students more than I was aware. The problem began emerging with discussion of the dying god archetype and the connection between a homosexual god Hyacinthus or a drunken god Dionysus or a sexual god born from an incestuous relationship, Adonis: these figures are compared to the Christian god in the literature. Only gradually did I become aware of how deeply disturbing these comparisons were to my more pious students, one of them actually accusing me of being an atheist. Another wrote me a little note that I probably should not be telling the class about the newly translated Gospel According to Judas, in which Judas is presented as the most loved disciple of Jesus, not the traitor. I was treading on some pretty deep water. But tread I did, wondering when those connections had ceased to amaze me and begun, instead, to fascinate me enough to prompt questions about the dominance of the orthodox Christian agenda on Western thinking. I wonder to what degree my teaching of myth is a little subversion on my part to de-Christianize the imagination.

Project Five. Nevertheless, not all students stayed under the rock of their belief systems. Seth, a quiet Christian student, made for his final project a memorial to the dying god: a

wooden circle painted white, showing the complete cycle of the dying gods' lives. (Seth understood the Odin-Christ-Narcissus connection and did not wince.) He crafted flowers around the circle in a cross formation to represent Narcissus and Adonis. About Narcissus he wrote:

Narcissus may not be considered a dying god to all; however, he does die for a cause. Tiresias, a Greek prophet said that if Narcissus ever truly knew himself he would perish. Narcissus fell in love with his own image and as a result perished. He serves as metaphor for loving one's self, which is a basic truth: one must love one's self before one can love others.

These simple words clarified for me the Tiresias prophecy, which I had never understood. Instead of "Narcissism" with its noun heaviness and social disease, the myth asks us to look deeper within ourselves, our image, our reflection. Know thyself is another way of saying Love thyself, a basic maxim for loving others. Thank you, Seth.

The course I teach teaches me. I have just completed my fourth year teaching this course, each year becoming more comfortable with the material. But I could not do this without my students' work. The rupture required for imagination to bloom can turn to rapture, in the spirit of Dennis Sumara's (2002) insightful comment: "If teachers love what they are teaching, and invite students into an inquiry of that subject matter, both the teacher and the students will experience love" (p. 119). Many students expressed their love for the work this assignment allowed them to do. The word "love" does not often occur with regard to the work students produce. When students say a project was "fun," I interpret this to mean they loved doing it, as in Alexis' comment:

All in all this project was fun to do. I was able to walk around my apartment and find materials that I already had to express the story of Daedalus and Icarus. Nothing new was bought specifically for the project, and in doing this I had to become really creative. I like the fact that the model is not predictable. It keeps people thinking, which is my goal in architecture.

I never saw Alexis express much emotion. She was a dutiful student, attending all classes – even make-up classes. She seemed tired, possibly bored, much of the time, although she dutifully did all assignments. She came alive at the end.

Unlike the face Alexis presented in class, Alex was clearly excited all quarter, seeing from the beginning how the material would help him with his own creating process. He wrote:

I feel my project is appropriate because I have learned so much about mythology and have incorporated so much of it in my stories. While doing the study packets or any other assignments, I would always have a separate sheet of paper with notes on ideas that I had while doing my work, or just notes of ideas from the material that I could bring in to my stories. I have really enjoyed this class from beginning to end and the material I have learned has already helped me in regards to my major of film.

And then there is Stevie's comment:

This project was one of the most enjoyable I've had here at SCAD. It was nice to have the freedom to do whatever I'd like. Honestly, this didn't even feel like a school project because I enjoyed working on it so much, never dreading the pressure to finish. I am extremely happy with the outcome.

Like many others in the class, Stevie's project was a model of a demon, inspired by the two-week study from a charming little book entitled *A field guide to demons, fairies, fallen angels, and other subversive spirits* (Mack & Dinah, 1998). The book reads, literally, like a field guide, as one might find for birds or flowers. Added to the detailed description of demonic creatures are folk legends and dispelling techniques. As with many a subject that appears simple, the stories became increasingly fascinating, leading to a different place inside the head. Gradually, I became aware that much of what might be considered "silly" (fairy circles, kingdoms under the sea, invisible forces) was, in reality, the latest topic of modern "string theory", (Greene, 2003) that posits the existence of parallel universes to our own. The theory proposes that vibrations underlie everything that happens in the universe, and this "everything" is composed of miniscule strands of energy that obscure numerous invisible dimensions and universes. The mood in class turned from a sense of superiority (WE don't believe in superstitions or old wives tales) to amazement. How is it that those "simple" folk of Northern Europe could be telling stories that today, without the fabula, are deemed "science"? String theory speaks of hidden dimensions and cosmic vitality. All quarter, this otherness was what *myth* had been describing! Removing the rock of literalism, myth engages us in metaphors, reality expressed in an as-if way. Myth has us "thinking" differently – if we dare remove the stones from our heads.

I come away from the quarter of teaching World Mythology this spring pondering an idea I was dimly beginning to articulate. The metaphors of myth might actually help us to imagine not only the fabulous otherness of story and of our creaturely selves but also that of the hovering presences found in general relativity and quantum mechanics. Teaching creativity in the classroom can be, truly, an introduction to brave new worlds.

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